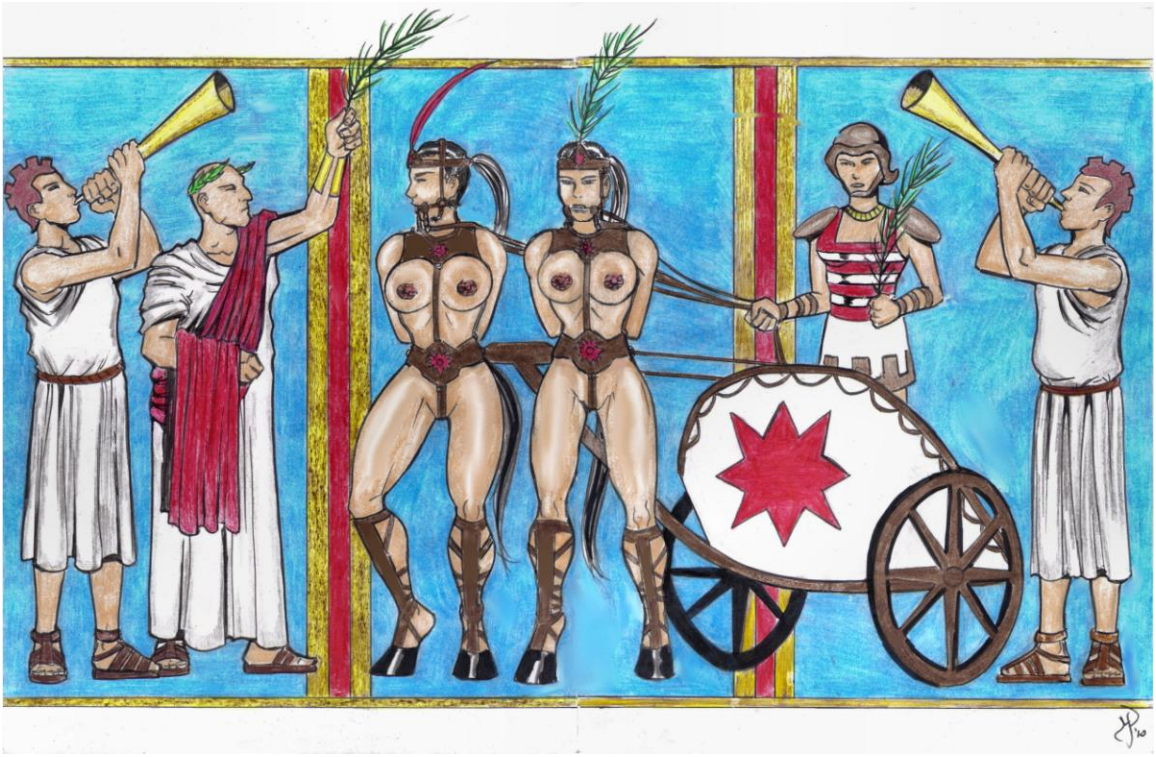


Ponygirls of Rome

A new discovery shines light on an unusual entertainment of imperial Rome.

What follows is part of a fragmentary and previously unknown "History of the Roman People" by Corinius of Ostia, most likely composed in the late second century CE. This fragment is the first item to be released from an exciting find made recently in Venice. Crews doing conservation work on a twelfth century villa discovered, in a small room enclosed by blank walls, a trove of artworks and manuscripts that had apparently been sealed away for hundreds of years. Among them were several ancient works previously unknown or long thought to be lost, by authors including Aristotle, Euripides, and Ovid; several chapters of Marco Polo's "Travels" that were not included in printed editions; and previously unknown sketches by DaVinci. Many of these works were discovered in poor condition, and will be released as conservation work progresses.

Translation by Dr. B. Fann.

[...]

Alongside the gladiators and charioteers, spectators of Rome enjoyed a variety of contests, often bizarre. One entertainment that was popular for a time was the racing of women harnessed in leather like ponies, who drew chariots that were smaller copies of the ones drawn by horses around the Circus Maximus.

With the lesser strength of the women their races were usually limited to one lap around the Circus* whereas horses usually ran seven, and sometimes these pony-girls would race in the Amphitheater. So as to increase interest stables sought to field racers who combined speed with feminine beauty, and to increase the spectacle pony-girls of exotic origins and appearance were often favored. It was said that this sport had its origins in private revelries at the country estates of the wealthiest patricians, perhaps during the debaucheries of the Bacchanalia.

In the public arenas, pony-girl racing grew from a titillating oddity into a serious contest. At the height of their popularity races were viewed by thousands, with many denarii wagered upon their outcomes. The four leading stables of the Circus - Red, White, Blue, and Green - raced women who for their natural gifts were sought far and wide by the stablemasters, and who underwent long and arduous training. A swift and shapely pony-girl was held to be among the rarest and most valuable of slaves. Popular and victorious pony-girls became widely known, and their names could frequently be seen in graffiti painted on the walls of the City by adherents of their factions.

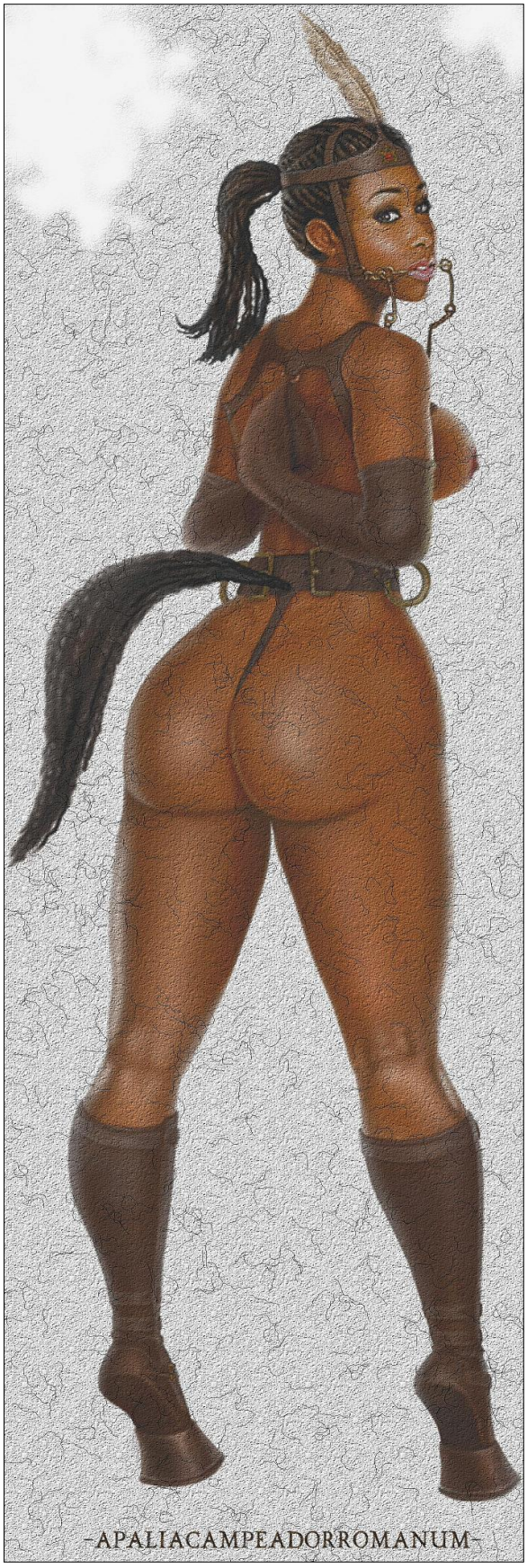
Since the girls raced with less speed and danger than the horses, the drivers of the chariots did not earn fame to the same degree as did the pony-girls, nor as did the horse-drivers. The pony-charioteers were usually slave women of higher rank than the pony-slaves they drove, but of lesser value. This contradiction in status and fame was said to lend strength to the drivers' whip-hands, and to this day a wife who treats harshly the slavegirl favored by her husband is said to be "whipping her pony."

The champion of her generation was Apalia. She was brought to Rome from Egypt, though she was no child of that country being born far to the South, beyond the springs of the Nile. It was said that one of her ancient foremothers had lain with Hercules himself, after he had stolen the apples of the Hesperides and thereby completed the eleventh of his Twelve Labors, and so the strength of the gods flowed in Apalia's veins. She was said to be taller than four men in five, with a figure like a monumental sculpture of Venus and legs as strong and dark as ebony wood. She ran as the left-hand lead in every race after her first, and led several teams to victory in prominent Games. It was said that the greatest impediment to her victory was in finding a partner who could run with her.

Apalia's fame transcended the racing course after a leading patron of the Red Faction, the senator Storius, made a drunken boast. To redeem his foolish wager Apalia, without aid of a partner, drew the senator and a colleague from the Amphitheater to the top of the Capitoline hill. It was said that half the people of the City lined the Via Sacra, to urge the dark beauty onwards and to wager on whether she would succeed, or burst her heart with the effort.

At the summit before the temple of Jupiter her master Storius, being moved by Apalia's spirit and faithfulness, knelt before his slave to thank her for preserving his honor and freed her on the spot. This display won for Storius the affection of the people, and he was voted consul the following year. But after the retirement of Apalia the sport of pony-girl racing declined, as it was said that none who followed could match her for speed, strength, or courage.

* [about three-quarters of a mile]



At right, the "Apalia" fresco from Herculaneum. Believed since its discovery in 1974 to depict a character from myth or fantasy, it must now be reconsidered as a portrayal of a historical figure.